Business Engagement, Research Impact and Academic Identity

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Keywords:
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Abstract:

Objectives:
Government policy is increasingly foregrounding universities as economic growth drivers for the nation in recession, and yet the individual academic’s position as researcher within this is under-researched, and they are subjected to increasing pressure to demonstrate impact and engagement with the world outside academia. This working paper aims to explore the attitudes of six academics working with post-1992 university business schools, to understand more about their attitudes towards working with business in their research, and possibilities for real-world impact.

Prior Work:

Approach:
This is a working paper, exploring initial results from a series of six semi-structured interviews with academics working in post-1992 universities in the North West of England. These interview transcriptions have been subjected to thematic analysis, and thematic networks created from each one.

**Results:**
Thematic networks have been compared, to show that some issues central to academic identity and research fitted with the current literature about academic identity and general, with some results showing potential for further research into post 92 business schools and universities in themselves. Emergent identity themes included time and lifestyle choice, the importance of external funding, and identification in terms of differentiation from their environment. A key theme of interest is that of the suggested definition of self in relation to the other, and the hierarchy implicit in it.

**Implications:**
This study has potential future implications for higher education and business engagement policy, and highlights the view of the academic in this policy debate. While not aiming to provide generalizability with such a small, in depth sample, it is hoped that this study points to further research, particularly as universities of all types are entering an unprecedented age of change, and academics a new world of uncertainty as more and more demands are placed on them.
Introduction

While a long-standing debate, there is renewed argument surrounding the role of academia in economic development, during these times of financial austerity (Collini, 2012, Edgerton, 2009, Perkmann et al, 2011). Government policy is increasingly foregrounding universities as economic growth drivers for the nation in recession (Wilson, 2012, Cable, 2010).

Universities are called to describe, quantify and promote their activity outside academia through the Impact agenda (ESRC, 2010), and funding for research and other activity in universities increasingly depends on demonstration and measurement of this impact. Together with the drive towards academic capitalism (Slaughter and Rhodes, 1994) universities are being asked to externally engage and demonstrate relevance than ever before.

While there is a growing body of research in the area of impact and academic enterprise, the individual academic’s position within this is recognised as under-researched (Rothaermel et al. 2007). The nature of the academic role is shifting, and new capabilities are demanded of academics (Bicknell et al, 2010, Kiernes and Wienroth, 2011). This role shift poses challenges to academics in terms of their identities. Academics in Post-1992 Business Schools provide an initial base for the research and this exploratory working paper. It has been argued that they are closer to the outside world than some other subjects and pre-1992 institutions (Brown et al., 1996 in AIM, 2006, p. 9). Business research has itself long been at the centre of the debate surrounding rigour of research vs. relevance to the outside world (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005, Ghoshal, 2005). This project aims to understand how academics are negotiating these shifts, as they called to justify their works in terms of impact outside academia.

Research Aims and Objectives

This research project aims to understand how academics are negotiating the identity-shift and rearrangement of capabilities born from the impact and enterprise agendas, and to explore a way forward. Specifically this project seeks:

1. To develop an understanding of six academics’ attitudes to research in post 1922 business schools
2. To attempt to understand academics’ “research identity” in the context of their other roles
3. To explore the possibility of unique characteristics of a post-1992 university in terms of research

Literature Review
a) Academic Capitalism and The Entrepreneurial University: Academic capitalism theory (Slaughter and Rhoades, 1994) puts the pursuit of knowledge “for the public good” sharply in opposition to “private” entrepreneurial aims, as universities strive to compete with constricted funds, and engage more with business and the outside world. The Entrepreneurial University, as envisioned by Clark in Creating Entrepreneurial Universities (1998), seeks to enable universities to compete through changing to diversified funding and opportunity grabbing. As government funding in the UK has contracted, this opposition between knowledge and profit has been echoed in the literature (Demeritt, 2010). This is generally examined in relation to the university itself, and its leader (Rubins, 2007), forcing new identities onto academics from the top down. This study will explore the current tensions above from the point of view of the individual academic as they must change and adapt to new circumstances.

b) Research Impact: The impact agenda has made waves across academia in the UK, as universities are required to demonstrate the “public good” of their work in explicit ways, with funding taking “explicit account” (Demeritt, 2010, p. 1) of the impact of previous (REF) and potential (research council) impact outside academia. While these requirements may be seen as pushing against the entrepreneurial university, by elucidating the public good of research, “the expression ‘impact’… imperceptibly elide(s) with ‘economic impact’ (Dean et al, 2013). Potentially, demonstrating impact for an individual academic may be a way to embrace the entrepreneurial university, or it may be a way of stating their removal from that agenda.

c) Academic Identity: Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1979) is now commonplace in social science, and in brief, emphasises the group to which a person belongs as being crucial to their identity, with the group categorising those outside it as “other”, and self-justifying through denigration of these others. The literature surrounding academic identity foregrounds “stable and legitimizing identities” (Henkel, 2005, p.155, Kearnes and Wienroth, 2011), which are being destabilised by the requirements to demonstrate impact and enterprise. These stable identities are generally agreed to be that of “liberal values of truth and critical inquiry, an appreciation of learning and scholarship, and a passion for intellectual freedom” (Winter and O’ Donoghue, 2012, Henkel, 2005). Changes in the late 20th century (let alone the challenges of the early twenty first century) are seen as a “major threat to academic identity”. (Henkel, 2005, p.159, Winter and O’Donohue, 2012). Bicknell et al (2010) examined the pull factors of academics who are engaging in knowledge transfer, and found that the academics interviewed thought about themselves in ways in which the differing demands of enterprise and research could be brought together in their identity. They “enjoy challenging academia to
respond in “real world” time frames”, and are seen as adaptive, shifting their capabilities to move into this new realm. Gonzales et al (2013) draw upon the work of Slaughter and Rhoades (2004), and use academic capitalism to examine experiences of individual academics in a particular university “striving” for prestige, through the lens of academic capitalism, which enables them to point to the idea of cultural resource in the academic context. This study aims to examine if academics are changing their identity within their academic frame, and the research is from a constructionist standpoint, thereby foregrounding the worlds of the individuals under study, within their environment, not the environment itself.

d) Business and Management as a Discipline

This emphasis on positivism and theory has led to significant criticism through the idea of “physics envy” (Morrell, 2008, p. 621, Bennis and O’Toole, 2005, p.98), and a long-standing debate about over-theorising and under-practice for this applied discipline (AIM, 2006, Bennis and O’Toole, 2005, Pfeffer and Fong, 2004, Ghoshal, 2005). Pfeffer and Fong and Bennis and O’Toole discuss the scientific paradigm as a negative pull on the attentions of business schools in the UK and US. This debate is still raging, and is a key part of understanding the nature of business and management research as an entire discipline.

Methodology

a) Data Collection

The method of data gathering reflect the open, exploratory search for answers to the research questions, and a Process Study (Van der Ven, 2007), has taken account of the research process as it occurs. This Process Study has taken the form of 6 interviews.

Academics in Post-1992 Business Schools provide an initial base for the research and this exploratory working paper. It has been argued that they are closer to the outside world than some other subjects and pre-1992 institutions (Brown et al., 1996 in AIM, 2006, p. 9). Business research has itself long been at the centre of the debate surrounding rigour of research vs. relevance to the outside world (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005, Ghoshal, 2005).

Sampling for this project has been:
Purposeful:
• Snowball
• Maximum variation (Patton, 2002, p. 243-4)

The potential research field for this study is very large (post 92 business school academics in the UK), and so some narrowing was needed, while keeping in mind the potential for further PhD work with a larger sample. The sampling was of the snowball type as a superior colleague of the researcher was able to recommend colleagues in 3 different universities who may be willing to be interviewed. Within this general frame, the researcher opted to ask for interviews those academics with varying levels, types and lengths of experience in academia.

Table 1: Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uni A</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Head of Research Centre</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Early Career Researcher</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uni B</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Reader</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Head of Research Programmes</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uni C</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Professor</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Associate Dean</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The flexibility and adaptability (Bell, 2010, p. 161) of interviews suits this exploratory research area, and will enable probing in a way that a survey data collection could not. These interviews will be in the field, due to the researcher’s proximity to the participants, availability and time constraints, but interviews will be conducted one to one, as some data gathered and issues discussed may be of a sensitive nature.

Each academic was interviewed for 1 hour, and once, in order to develop initial ideas for this research project and working paper, with the aim of returning to the interviews when the research is more developed.

b) Analysis

Due to the exploratory nature of the data and the aims of the research, along with the lack of conceptual framework, Grounded Theory is a strong future form of research and analysis. Therefore, the thematic analysis undertaken here precludes potential future grounded theory work (Strauss and
Corbin, 1990, Glaser and Strauss, 1967, Patton, 2002). Prior knowledge and new data require balance, and as prior knowledge is scant, new data will direct the study and may allow theory to develop (Dey, 1999, 2004). Grounded Theory is compatible with the use of semi-structured interviews, although there is direction to the questioning in this method (Silverman, 2007). The line of questioning was thematic, surrounding the research subject and aim, and not related specifically to literature.

Attride Stirling (2001) draws two broad ways of coding in thematic analysis – (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 1996) either by “theoretical issues” or “on the basis of salient issues that arise in the text itself” (390).

As befits the exploratory nature of the research strategy, the semi-structured interviews, and the nature of the knowledge to be derived the researcher has undertaken the latter of the options, and, using the transcription diary as an aid to the process of coding, has coded according to the text of the transcript. This in vivo coding is driven from the inductive nature of the research strategy, and allows the coding and the analysis to remain very close to the data. Initial coding was thus categorized according to the respondent’s own words, and was only extrapolated out at the second pass.

Basic themes, “simple premises characteristic of the data” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.389, Hines and Bambrick, 2011, p.10) were derived from each set of coded text segments, and referred back to the transcripts. Organising Themes “organises the Basic Themes into clusters of similar issues” (Attride-Stirling, 2001, p.389).

Discussion
Due to the semi-structured nature of the interview structure, respondents were directed to talk about what most mattered to them within the themes set out in the interview sheet. The global themes drawn from the data over the iterative process are different for each academic (Table 4 below). This much is to be expected, given the heterogeneity of academics (Henkel, 2005, p.158) with the size and choice of sample participants, and their length of career and involvement in research.

The themes presented here demonstrate organisation of themes surrounding how each academic identifies themselves in terms of research, not how much research they do, or what their research is.

For example, Respondent 1 identifies themselves very much as different from the institution, as can be seen from the network and table, but also different from their research field. Some phrases, such as “wagging my finger at them (others in the field)” and “drag the norm” suggest leadership in terms
of the field, while others, in relation to the university, such as “going in the opposite direction” suggest more autonomy. Interestingly, for this opposite-travelling autonomous academic, collaboration is important in terms of what kind of researcher they are, and indeed has helped them with funding success. Crucially here, the collaboration is outside of their own institution. There is a feeling with this academic that they want to define themselves as other, separate, to their institution. The academics interviewed did share themes, but not always with the same emphasis, and with the same notion of identity (Henkel, 2005) attached to them.
Table 2: Shared Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Global</th>
<th>Organising</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Differentiation from environment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>External</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-post 92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Development of Career</td>
<td></td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Post 1992</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Differentiation from environment</td>
<td></td>
<td>Impact</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Success</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Institution</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Differentiation from institution</td>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-post 92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Values</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Career Progression</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Bidding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Practicality</td>
<td></td>
<td>Time for Research</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Career Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Research Motivations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Shifting Relationships to Role</td>
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<td>Changes in Sector</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Support</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Contrast to Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most prevalent themes have then been compared with the literature about academic identity, business and management research, and the role of university research in industry/impact. Autonomy and its definition as “other” to the environment or institution was the most prevalent theme in the data.

In terms of social identity theory (Tajfel, 1979) the groups to which these academics “belong” and those about which they speak in opposition is key here; particularly Respondent 1, who specifically refers to membership of a group of researchers, in opposition to membership of the university as a group.
Henkel’s study (2005) of science academics, and has been linked in the literature to the “academic
endeavour” (Winter and O’Donohue, 2012, p. 570), of free thought. The theme of moral and social
driving force came through strongly with all academics interviewed, which again relates back to the
theme of the academic purpose, placing these academics within the known field.

Those academics with more of an emphasis on the career route (2 and 5) showed less of a tendency
towards defining themselves as autonomous from their institution or field, presumably because they
had significant career plans within these institutions. These academics were the ones at the earliest
stage of their careers. Those more established in their research field (1, 3 and 4) were the strongest in
their differentiation of self. This could be for many reasons, including: security in their field/
extensive CV, therefore less need of the institution; been through more policy changes than others, so
more cynical; more linked to pre-92 university and want to differentiate themselves in that way.
Indeed, respondent 4, who referred the most to the differences between pre and post 92 universities,
went as far as checking his position in a “new” university with colleagues in an “old” university to
see if he would still be on the same footing (Table 7).

Collaboration is a key theme, or part of a theme (5), for all respondents. Collaboration can in these
cases take many forms, either inspiration (5), support (2), access to funding (1), or the opportunity to
escape the institution (4), connected to the key autonomy theme.

This emphasis on differentiating self as a researcher from the institution, and in one case from the
field, requires further investigation, and has not been thus investigated in the literature, which may
lend the suggestion of a potential post 1992 business school academic characteristic.

A key characteristic of 1, 3, 4 and 6 was the managerialism vs. research theme. This is similar to the
above discussion, but inclusive of the academic manager (6), who defines her research as separate
and “creative” and her own, in sharp contrast to the management procedures that must take place.

Impact and funding were not as high as expected, given the literature on post 1992 business schools’
engagement with industry (AIM, 2006). This may be because the engagement is often on an
enterprise footing, rather than research (Woollard, 2011).

As to the question posed by Rothaermel (2007), regarding how academics have responded to “new
pressures for engagement with industry” a slightly messy picture emerges from these individual
academics.
Respondents in general agreed that research should mean working with the outside world, with one respondent (1) suggesting a practical method for doing so, with knowledge “brokers”. In terms of research, respondent 5 strongly asserted that research should be practically focused: "I kind of almost can’t see the point of research if it doesn’t do that", and all seemed to agree on the usefulness of proposed research. Two academics have had issues with businesses not wanting to be involved in their research project, which is not reflected in the literature and policy rhetoric.

There was a general disillusion with funding streams, except respondent 1, who had had major success (which may be connected to his autonomy), which is to be expected. The creative ways around it, by using other funding streams to develop papers, proposed by the early career researcher, respondent 2, may be one solution.

Time was also an enormous issue for the non-research-specific academics, namely the early career researcher (2), the research leader (5) and the academic manager (5). Two of the research-specific academics (3 and 4) strongly stated their ability to work outside normal hours, and lack of family commitments, helped them become the published researchers they now are, whereas 2 of the female respondents who had issues with time, discussed their family commitments and maternity.

There are a significant amount of issues, challenges, enablers and ideas for research, in these interviews. While of course the academic community is heterogeneous, it can be seen that there are similar challenges and foci within this very small sample of 6.

Within the scanty literature, these interviews agree with what is known of other disciplines, but these academics may also have challenges specific to post 1992 business schools.

**Conclusion**

This study has highlighted many themes, which require discussion on their own, and the researcher hopes to pursue some of these further into the PhD. A key theme of interest is that of the suggested definition of self in relation to the other, and the hierarchy implicit in it. The closed nature of the academic environment exacerbates this, and it would merit further investigation.

The process has been fascinating, and this is a rich area for enquiry. As universities are looked to as economically responsible, and students as customers, the research may “suffer” as one academic (5) put it. It would seem that post 1992 business school academics do try and engage with business and the outside world, but may be confused, and in some cases lack knowledge on funding. With time
such a key issue for academics in this consumer environment, it is potentially research funding that will buy time and prestige within the community, and collaboration is used by these academics as the route to this.

This study is limited in scope; this data needs to be looked at further through different lenses, now that the exploratory work has been performed. It aims to lay a foundation for it. The PhD will probe further into academic identities, with a view to eventually develop theory, through a grounded theory approach, with which to change practice and support success with the research identity in this marketised environment (Bok, 2003) in higher education.
References


